

Teaching One's Own Children

By Mirjana Savic-Obradovic

Although I have many years of teaching experience, it is challenging and I must admit a bit threatening to be teaching a foreign language to my own children. In this situation I find myself caught in the middle of not wanting to force English on them and my conviction that my children should be exposed to English as soon as possible.

In the eyes of my children I am known as *Mother* rather than as *Teacher*. We have no classroom in the traditional sense because any place can be our classroom; and we have no regular timetable like my children have at school.

Deciding on what teaching and learning strategies I should follow takes a lot of consideration.

Here are some of the ideas I have used in teaching English to my two daughters. The girls were four and six when we started, and they are eight and ten today. They are becoming more and more fluent in the language.

I taught nursery rhymes and songs like: *Hey Diddle Diddle*; *Baa Baa Black Sheep*; *This Little Piggy Went to the Market*; *London Bridge*; *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*; and *Billy Boy*. My daughters were willing to repeat the lines and lyrics, and I recorded their reciting and singing. As time has passed, these recordings provide evidence of how the girls used to talk and how young they were.

At one time, my children joined with a group of my students at school who were their same ages. This exposure to a new group was refreshing for everyone. Apart from being stimulated by listening to radio and TV English programmes, the girls were delighted to hear other children pronounce English and to talk with them.

They became members of The British Council Library and The American Center Library. Since we don't live in Belgrade where the libraries are situated, visiting them is a very formal outing. We have a special bag for the books and cassettes that they select; and my daughters scan the titles themselves for the books that are most interesting to them.

Here are some of the titles they enjoyed:

The Groggs Have a Wonderful Summer

by Roy and Anne Bentley

Lucy and Tom 's Day by Shirley Hughes

Never Mind by Michael Rosen

Fancy Nancy by Ruth Craft (really fancy)

Lulu and the Flying Babies by Posy Simmonds

I placed two little decorative blackboards on the walls of their room. They were put there primarily for the purpose of spelling practice. Once they learned the alphabet, I would write new words on the blackboard and leave them there for a period of time. Some of the messages were:

It's the end of the school-year!
Ana, happy birthday!
Vera, put on your red jumper!

When my daughters began to write messages themselves,

- a. they were one-way at first, but soon they became interactive. *How are you, Ana? Fine, thank you. And you, Mum?*
- b. *Do your best at music school! I was excellent at piano playing.*

I included the following functions and structures everyday in family communication:

- a. greeting: Be good, girls.
- b. statement: I am so tired today.
- c. polite request: Bring me a glass of water, please.
- d. question: Where's Dad?
- e. proverb: An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

I encouraged the girls to correspond in English. They became members of an international pen-friend club and received many letters from all over the world, from Australia to St. Lucia. This long-distance communication helped them improve their written English and to learn more geography.

I used occasions like Christmas, Easter, and birthdays to give them specially designed English language presents. One of them was a book I wrote and made for Ana. The pages of the book are shown below.

The book was not illustrated in the beginning and Ana was encouraged to do this herself in accordance with the text. She enjoyed it greatly.

I buy books in English for their personal library. It consists of such titles as:

Nursery Rhymes Book by Beatrix Potter
Rainy Day Fun and Games by Maureen Maddren
The Hamlyn Calculator Activity Book by Burton Marks
Hide and Seek/Amazing Monkeys, National Geographic Action Books
1984. The Year I Was Born -compiled by Sally Tagholm, Fantail Publishing

They received subscriptions to Mary Glasgow Publications magazines (*Click*, *Crown*, *Clockwork*) and they regularly took part in various language competitions sponsored by these magazines. They also benefited from the pages of my own magazines *The National Geographic*, *Reader's Digest*, *English Teaching Forum*, *News-week* , etc. Even when they were

quite little, they used to turn pages for hours. Later I realized they had memorized many items in the texts: aggressive headlines, advertisements, and parts of cartoons.

Soon my daughters will enter English programmes at school. I do hope they have acquired a sound basis to build a solid "language house."

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